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Book Review: The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology by Daniel White Hodge

Steven Ybarrola
Asbury Theological Seminary

about larger congregations versus more congregations, there is no discussion of how large churches can be multiplying churches. It would be interesting to see the authors' principles filtered through the G-12 cell church strategy followed by César Castellanos and Lawrence Khong. A discussion of the South Korean work of multiplying disciples and large churches would have been a helpful illustration of how these principles can be practiced with churches of large sizes.

We all are passionate about particular values in Christ's work because of our giftings and pilgrimages. This is God's wonderful sovereign work of making sure His Son's message and love is distributed over this world. Chester and Timmis have experienced life paths which have sovereignly prepared them to be passionate for Christ's work in the way they are doing Christianity. Their genuiness and authentic application of the Great Commandment and Great Commission gives the church solid encouragement. Their story challenges every church leader to believe in the laity and their potential to multiply disciples and churches. We must devise ways to allow them to do ministry and missions. Chester and Timmis have shown us a viable picture of what this growth can look like.

Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books, 2010, 250 pp., $17.00.

Reviewed by Steven Ybarrola, Ph.D., Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Asbury Theological Seminary

Daniel White Hodge earned his Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary and is currently adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University and Citrus College. He is also involved in urban ministry with the Urban Youth Workers Institute and as a national trainer for the Christian Community Development Association. Hodge is ideally suited to write a book on Hip Hop culture and theology since, as he tells us in the introduction, he was profoundly affected as a youth by the rap music associated with this subculture. After receiving Christ and being baptized, he viewed such Hip Hop leaders as Tupac Shakur as "blasphemers" and preached that Hip Hop was "from the devil" (19). However, four years later, he began to reevaluate Hip Hop and "found a deeper message within the music, genre, and people that were involved in the culture" than he had before (20). As a result, Hodge represents the perspective of a critical insider, which is very valuable in understanding a subculture that is probably foreign to most of us and considered evil and reprobate by much of the evangelical community.

The stated goal of the book is to "build a case for understanding what Hip Hop is about—its culture, its people and its message—spiritually, theologically, ecclesiologically and missionally" (20), and Hodge is largely successful in this endeavor. The book is divided into three "sessions"—an overview of the historical development of Hip Hop, its theology, and the missional engagement with the subculture. In session one, "A Bird's-Eye View of Hip Hop," the author covers the development of Hip Hop from its beginning in the 1970s to present day. For those unfamiliar with the subculture, this "session" provides a very good introductory background to the history of the phenomenon. Hodge defines Hip Hop as "an urban subculture that seeks to express a lifestyle, attitude or theology. Rejecting the dominant culture, it seeks to increase social consciousness, cultural awareness and racial pride. Rap music functions as the vehicle by which the cultural messages of Hip Hop are sent, and the industry by which Hip Hop culture is funded and propagated" (38). In discussing the relationship between the development of Hip Hop and the church, the author states, "The church helped shape many of Hip Hop's roots. The call and response of the pastor, and the sense of community developed in the Black church are reflected in the values of the DJ or the emcee" (47).

Session two, "The Theology of Hip Hop," represents, as White Hodge tells us, the "meat" of the book. He states, "Hip Hop theology presumes that God 'shows up' in unusual and interesting places. Thus Hip Hop theology is, in essence, the study of the Godhead in the urban context, to better understand God's rich and complex love for everyone (not just those who 'look nice' and 'talk nice'), and the revelation of God through the oppressed being liberated from the oppressor" (74). In this session, Hodge discusses a theology of suffering, community, the Hip Hop Jesuz, social action and justice, and the profane. Essentially, the author argues, Hip Hoppers can relate to the rejection and suffering Jesus experienced, as well as other notable figures in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Jeremiah, Job, and Paul). "For Hip Hoppers this means Jesus not only knows about pain, suffering and death; he can actually be with you in the process of all of it" (99).

The Hip Hop Jesuz "is both 'above,' in terms of theological inquiry, but also 'below,' in terms of access" (127). This understanding views the image of Jesus often presented in the contemporary church as "too corny" and, more seriously, as a way to maintain the status quo. Hodge states, "Tupac's Black Jesuz is not the Jesus of history but a Jesuz *for* the 'hood, a Jesuz who understood the issues confronting the people of the 'hood and accepted those with such issues" (128).

The chapter, "A Theology of Social Action and Justice" focuses on the "nit grit" 'hood theology of the late Hip Hop music and film artist Tupac Shakur (who

was gunned down on the streets of Las Vegas in 1996, a murder that has yet to be solved). This was the topic of Hodge's dissertation. Therefore, the reader is presented with an interesting and well-researched understanding of the theology and spirituality of one of the true leaders (even in death) of the Hip Hop community. Hodge ends session two with a discussion of the role of the profane in both Hip Hop culture and the Bible. One of the key complaints Hip Hoppers have of the church is that members too often try to present themselves as holy and superior to others, which leads to hypocrisy that is all too apparent to those outside the church. One of the key Hip Hop values is "authenticity," and the denial of the profane in real life is viewed as extremely disingenuous and unauthentic.

The last session, "Missionally Engaging Hip Hop's Theology," begins an important discussion on how to reach the Hip Hop community with the Good News in a way that meets their needs and is viewed as authentic. As Hodge puts it, "missionally embracing the Hip Hop ethnos is scary. It is dangerous. It is culturally challenging. Because if we are truly able to let the Holy Spirit work, then we run the serious risk of yielding up our control and dominance and handing it over to God" (192). Using Niebuhr's categories in *Christ and Culture,* Hodge strongly argues that we must enter into dialogue with the Hip Hop culture (which means that we must *understand* it) in order to see Christ transform it, not into our image, but His. Drawing from Paul Hiebert's work on bounded and centered sets, Hodge contends that we must develop a "fluid centered theology" where the center (Jesuz) rather than the boundaries is emphasized. The author concludes with "six urgent missiological directions that the urban church needs to address" (218).

I believe Hodge has done the evangelical church a great service in writing this book. As I read his vivid descriptions of how Jesus was viewed in the 'hood, I was struck by how their view of Jesus seemed to me to be much truer to the Jesus of Scripture than the one that is often presented in white middle-class congregations. In the Hip Hop community, we see a Jesus who identifies with those who suffer, who are marginalized by society; a Jesus who is opposed to oppression and the oppressors and wants to set the captives free; a Jesus who is not afraid to be seen as profane, especially by those who are self-righteous; a Jesus who is willing to overturn a few tables in order shake up the establishment. I am reminded of Hebrews 4:15 (a verse quoted by the author as well): "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (NRSV).

Hodge's description of how the Hip Hop community has been misunderstood and vilified by much of the contemporary church also reminded me of another youth movement a number of years ago that faced similar ostracism from the

organized church, and one in which I was involved—the Jesus Movement. Like the Hip Hoppers today, we were looking for a relevant Jesus, a Jesus who spoke to our time and condition. We were suspicious of the institutional church, wondering if it really had anything to offer to our culture, or if it had just sold its soul to the establishment. As a result, many house churches were started as a way to "do church" in a different and more relevant way. The question of relevancy should be always before us, and the Hip Hop community certainly is a reminder of this. Unfortunately, and much to our disgrace, Islam has been more effective in reaching out to this community than has the church.

Although I appreciate the work Hodge has done, I do have a few criticisms of the book. First, though he is critical of those who superficially reach out to the Hip Hop community, such as Holy Hip Hoppers and those who use Hip Hop as "bait" to try and lure young people into the church, Hodge doesn't really present a vision, or concrete example, of what a Hip Hop church or Christian community might look like (other than it would probably be quite different from the mainline or evangelical churches). While in the last couple of chapters he provides us with a framework for reaching out to Hip Hoppers, I was left wondering what a true Hip Hop church/Christian community would look like. I mentioned how during the Jesus Movement we developed our own form of church, but I don't see that articulated very well in the book.

Second, Hodge has a tendency to make broad generalizations when referring to the "church," which at times weaken his argument. For example, he states, "Tupac's theological understanding of Christ is in contrast to the muddied and marred 'White' theology that suggests you have to be 'perfect' in order to enter heaven" (213). While Hodge goes to great lengths to help us understand the subtle nuances of Hip Hop theology, he is often too quick to oversimplify the theology and practices of the contemporary church.

Third, although Hodge is thorough in helping us understand Hip Hop culture from the perspective of a critical insider, at times I would have liked to have seen more of the critical element applied to Hip Hop as well. The author tells us early on that he is not dealing as much with the more commercialized form of Hip Hop that flaunts violence and misogyny, but it certainly seems that a more critical eye could have been used in the analysis of some of the music, such as gangsta rap. Also, though Hodge helps us to understand that Tupac Shakur was "obsessed with God," especially in his early years, it seemed to me that at times the most generous of interpretations were given to some of his lyrics in order to make them seem more "Christian."

Those criticisms aside, I believe Hodge has provided us with a book that will be very valuable for those interested or involved in urban (and increasingly suburban) ministry, as well as those who simply want to know more about this subculture. It is a book I would use in my Urban Anthropology course, particularly since Hodge argues for a cultural relativistic posture (though he doesn't use those words) when he states, "If we are to listen to the communal story of Hip Hop, then we must be ready to, as [Martin] Buber suggests, 'seek to understand what people are saying through the culture before we critique the culture'" (123). We must understand Hip Hop culture, just like any culture, in all of its complexity if we want to minister effectively to, and be ministered by, those in the community.